



Student: **Michael Higley-Vance**

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EL7008-8

Dr. Linda Collins

Online Learning Communities

Activity #4: Collaboration Activities

Comments:

Faculty Use Only

Hi, Michael, you have included some important information and activities to address developing collaborative learning environments. Your idea to start with smaller groups of perhaps two learners as a team is a great approach and also promotes a clearer role of responsibility. Meaningful and real-life experiences can be fostered in a collaborative learning environment as students work together toward a goal. How do you encourage students who say they don't want to work in a team environment? Constructing a meaningful discussion topic can also be a challenge as you want students to engage and

not just say “yes” or “no,” or “I agree.” Although I engage with students in discussion boards, there are some that I have solely for student-to-student interaction and I do not respond until the topic closes to empower students to be creative during the forum (I still monitor the discussions). Do you feel this is a valid approach or should the instructor always be a part of the conversation? Peer assessments for collaborative activities can provide important feedback to the participant. How important do you feel a rubric is for this type of activity?

Dr. Linda D. Collins 6.7 2.9 May 5, 2014

Collaborative Student Activities

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Collaborative Student Activities

Learning within the online environment, often termed e-learning, differs from the traditional classroom learning community (Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke, 2009; Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Unlike traditional classroom learning environments, online learning environments foster opportunities for learners to interact, collaborate, and facilitate their own learning (Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke, 2009). Developing an effective collaborative e-learning activity begins with understanding how learners process information online (Ahmad, 2012; Siemens, 2005). Collaborative learning can take many forms within an online environment but is most commonly defined by shared knowledge and interactions between learners (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; see also Zygouris-Coe, 2012). According to Feenberg (1999) and Zygouris-Coe (2012) online instructors must focus on instructional and pedagogical approaches to deliver effective online instruction. This paper aims to discuss the challenges and benefits of three specific activity types, suggestions, and the learning theories to which collaborative learning activities are supported.

Theoretical Framework

Behaviorism, cognitivism, connectivism, and constructivism are the most common learning theories utilized when developing online learning environments (Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke, 2009; Siemens, 2005). Constructivism views learning as a process in which the learner actively engages in new ideas through collaborative grouping situations (Siemens, 2005). Given the context of e-learning, constructivism and connectivism are the theories that acknowledges the impact technology has on learning the most (Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke, 2009; Siemens, 2005).

According to Ahmad (2012) constructivism is a good theoretical framework for e-learning because it ensures learning happens among all learners however, connectivism is a fairly new learning theory that should be considered. Connectivism blends together cognitivism and constructivism theories of learning and is the process that occurs within a constantly changing learning environment, which the learner cannot control (Palloff & Pratt, 2005b; Siemens, 2005). Connectivist learning environments are constantly changing in large part because technology and web-based applications are constantly improving and evolving (Mallon, 2013). The understanding that learning is based on rapidly altering technology and new information encourages learners to draw distinctions between important and unimportant information (Mallon, 2013; Paily, 2013; Siemens, 2005). Connectivism focuses on helping the learner make connections with content (Mallon, 2013) and through interactions with others (Siemens, 2005; Zygoris-Coe, 2012). These connections enable learners to learn more and are “more important than our current state of knowing” (Siemens, 2005). According to Mallon (2013) connectivism is characterized by individual learning while still providing elements of collaboration occurring most often within specialized collaborative groups.

The Activities

The inclusion of collaborative activities in an online course leads to positive student performance outcomes (Haythornthwaite, 2006). Collaborative group interactions facilitate active learning, shared knowledge, and promote social interaction and a supportive e-learning community (Haythornthwaite, 2006; Oliveira, Tinoca, & Pereira, 2011; Zygouris-Coe, 2012). Collaboration also models how to work with others within real-world situations (Getman, 2005; Harper & Ghia, n.d., Haythornthwaite, 2006; Smith, 2012). These collaborative activities help train learners for the 21st century workplace, including learning how to share ideas, express opinions, and manage time (Haythornthwaite, 2006). While the outcomes associated with collaborative activities are mostly positive there are benefits and challenges to implementing these activities into an e-learning course.

Collaborative Group Activities

Group activities range from informal discussions to highly structured collaborative grouping activities. Collaborative group learning is one way for learners to establish communication with others in the course. Research and practitioners of online learning environments largely support the benefits of true collaboration through discussions and sharing of new information (Oliveira, Tinoca, & Pereira, 2011; Palloff & Pratt, 2005a; Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

Challenges. According to Palloff and Pratt (2005a) a successful collaborative group activity allows learners to feel a sense of community and provides learners with an active role and responsibility, which is shared among his or her established groups. However, developing guidelines that govern these activities can be difficult without taking an instructor-centered approach to learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Additionally, establishing collaborative groups within the online learning environment can also be a difficult task for instructors of online

learners (Harper & Ghia, n.d.). One strategy to address this challenge might be to divide students into small groups of two or three. Dividing students into smaller, more intimate groupings creates opportunities for collaboration and addresses the more reserved student learner (Harper & Ghia, n.d.; Palloff & Pratt, 2005a). Additionally, creating collaborative groupings in this way encourages learners to become active participants in the collaborative learning process (Palloff & Pratt, 2005a; Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

Furthermore, instructors should expect occasional conflicts to arise between learners during collaborative group activities (Harper & Ghia, n.d.). The key to overcoming these situations is for the instructor to monitor dialogue and participation levels and facilitate conflict resolution, when necessary (Palloff & Pratt, 2005a). This practice allows learners an opportunity to learn from his or her experiences and create collaborative group norms for themselves (Harper & Ghia, n.d.; Palloff & Pratt, 2005b). Lastly, instructors should address the lack of learner participation within a grouped activity by attempting to address the learner's individual needs (Mallon, 2013).

Benefits. Online learners in well-designed learning environments experience meaningful learning, develop higher order thinking, and begin to develop an e-learning community when collaborative group activities are encouraged (Morrison, 2014). Research supports a number of benefits to collaborative online group activities such as, modeling group norms and posting expectations (Palloff & Pratt, 2005b). Collaborative group activities should be group centered to begin forming a collaborative online sense of community support (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). This can be easily achieved through introductory activities that require learners to get to know one another. Therefore later, more complex collaborative activities can be presented to learners

without learners feeling overwhelmed or anxious because the collaborative community support has already been established (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Group Discussions

According to Palloff and Pratt (2007) when learners engage in discussions with other learners instead of just the instructor, the opportunities for knowledge retention is great. The use of online discussion activities within online learning continues to grow according to Aundree and Haycock (2014). A number of researchers have conducted investigations into online collaborative discussion groups, focusing on the ways in which discussion activities move learners from learner to expert (Aundree & Haycock, 2014; Palloff & Pratt, 2005a). According to Harper and Ghia (n.d.) it is important to provide learners with opportunities to reflect and share viewpoints; this can be done through collaborative online discussion activities.

Challenges. Online discussions require instructors to moderate the discussion activities and this requires time. In a primarily asynchronous learning environment this can be tedious and time consuming for instructors (Liang & Alderman, 2007; Zygoris-Coe, 2012). Additionally, the development of collaborative online discussions requires instructors to include sufficient time for learner discourse and moderation (Liang & Alderman, 2007). To ensure learner success, instructors must actively work to ensure discussions are engaging and lead learners to high quality learning outcomes. The challenge for online instructors becomes how to construct a collaborative discussion activity, which is engaging and meets the needs of all learners. A way this can be addressed is for instructors to develop discussions that are specifically focused on one or two specific learning goals (Palloff & Pratt, 2005b).

Benefits. In collaborative group discussions learners learn to listen attentively to each other and value the efforts of shared knowledge and input (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Online

discussion technology also helps learners respond to questions, participate, and offer peer feedback to support the sharing of new information (Liang & Alderman, 2007). According to Alexander (2010) successful discussion groups include learners who are actively engaged in accountable and responsible talk. Accountable talk between learners emphasizes logical connections and allows learners to draw reasonable conclusions to new information (Alexander, 2010). Moreover, learning through collaborative online discussion groups is reciprocal and the most direct way for instructors to assess learning online (Alexander, 2010; Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Feedback and Assessment Activities

Research overwhelmingly supports that online peer assessments can support a student-centered approach when assessments are implemented through collaborative peer-to-peer communication, active participation, and interactivities (Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke, 2009; Siemens, 2005). Furthermore, the ability to provide constructive feedback helps learners' process new information, which is not a naturally acquired skill in e-learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). According to Getman (2005), Patricia Comeaux suggests instructors should use assessments not just as a way to measure individual online learning but that assessments can be natural extensions of learning. Additionally, Getman (2005) and Tinoca, Oliveria, and Pereira (n.d.) suggest that learners who participate in collaborative assessments and peer-to-peer feedback activities are better prepared for real-world situations. Lastly, it is important for online instructors to view assessments as a process for learning as well as an assessment of learning (Liang & Alderman, 2007).

Challenges. Planning for collaborative learning requires a different approach to pedagogy and learning (Feenberg, 1999; Smith, 2012). According to Zygouris-Coe (2012) instructors should take advantage of the technology and tools available, continuously monitor student interactions, and manage time wisely to overcome these challenges. Feedback and assessment activities require instructors to understand assessment processes and the factors that influence these collaborative online activities (Liang & Alderman, 2007). This can pose a challenge to instructors who do not have the training needed to design and facilitate these activities within an e-learning environment. One way to overcome this challenge is for online instructors to develop and share best practices that facilitate feedback and assessment activities (Liang & Alderman, 2007; Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Benefits. As mentioned previously the planning and design of collaborative activities is critical in supporting effective interactions. One benefit to assessment and feedback activities is learner motivation, which is fostered within learners by engaging them in real-world assessment situations (Getman, 2005; Harper & Ghia, n.d., Haythornthwaite, 2006; Smith, 2012). According to Smith (2012) another benefit to collaborative activities are that they encourage learners to use external evaluations to provide internal self-assessments of their own learning. Additionally, by sharing assessments and allowing learners to provide peer-to-peer feedback creates transparent learning environments and supports developing skills within a growing learning community (Smith, 2012; Zygouris-Coe, 2012). Lastly, another benefit to allowing learners to provide each other with constructive feedback facilitates two-way learning; once when the learner participates in the assessment and again when the learner is providing peer feedback (Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

Conclusion

Collaborative e-learning activities present learners and instructors with both challenges and benefits, which must be considered to successfully participate in collaborative online learning. Constructivism and connectivism best support e-learning because they focus on making connections with new information through learner and technology interactions. Collaborative learning is complex and should allow time and support to encourage the development of online learning communities. Additionally, creating collaborative activities requires sound pedagogy, motivation, and proficiency to be successful. As students, instructors, and technology advance, so too will collaborative learning activities.

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Linda Collins 5/5/14 9:04 AM

Comment [1]: Misspelled word

Linda Collins 5/5/14 9:04 AM

Comment [2]: n.d.

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